

USS Pueblo:

The Ship That Went Out in the Cold

INSTALLMENT 22

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On Dec. 19, "The Day They Forgave Us," GG had two shocks for the Pueblo's men.

The first was to tell the men to remember the humane treatment they had received in captivity—this right on top of Hell Week. Then he said there was a good chance the men would be going home, that the United States was ready to apologize. That startled Bucher. He did not think his country would ever say it was sorry for something he had never done.

The North Koreans said there would be a final press conference Dec. 22. The night before, Barrett's Room Daddy took him aside and "gave me the usual stuff about how well they had treated us and wouldn't it be nice going home?"

Barrett said he thought they would be freed before Christmas.

"You may be right," said the Room Daddy.

At the news conference there were only eight or 10 North Koreans. The only questions were whether the men were happy to be going home. The men gave all the right answers. "We just didn't want to mess it up," said Schumacher.

Later that night the guards came and took the men individually from their rooms, one every 15 minutes. That didn't surprise Schumacher. They were always taking someone out of a room day or night. When no one came back, he began to be suspicious. Then his turn came.

He was taken to a room, stripped and given new clothing: a heavy jacket, pants and

an under jacket, all gray. Then the men were gathered and put aboard four buses. This time there were no blindfolds. Instead, each prisoner was given a pack of filter-tip cigarettes and a sack of hard candy. Then the buses left for a railroad station 20 minutes away.

BREAKING CAMP

Left behind were all the letters and pictures from home and a few meager souvenirs—buttons and the like that they had picked up around the play yard. Schumacher recalls Bucher had also written "Communism sucks" on the underside of his table.

Aboard the train each man had a wooden bunk and a blanket. "I asked God to make everything go right and thanked him for making this day possible," said Schumacher.

After six hours the train reached Kaesong, and the men were put on buses for the two-hour ride to Panmunjom. The North Koreans took back the candy and cigarettes. The men were told they would be released in inverse order of rank except for the commander who would go first to verify Hodge's body. But at Panmunjom, an officer told them something had gone wrong with the negotiations. And there, in sight of freedom, they waited and wondered.

Gen. Pak, as usual, was mad. He had one more trick to play before this 29th and final meeting in the little hut over the Pueblo was to finish.

At 9 a.m. Gen. Woodward began to read the statement born of a Washington housewife.

"The position of the United States Government with regard to the Pueblo, as consistently expressed in the negotiations at Panmunjom and in public, has been that the ship was not en-

gaged in illegal activity, that there is no convincing evidence that the ship at any time intruded into the territorial waters claimed by North Korea, and that we could not apologize for actions which we did not believe took place. The document which I am going to sign was prepared by the North Koreans and is at variance with the above position, but my signature will not and cannot alter the facts. I will sign the document to free the crew and only to free the crew."

AMERICA'S APOLOGY

Then he signed.

"To the Government of Demo-

Democratic People's Republic of Korea," the document began, "The Government of the United States of America, acknowledging the validity of the confessions of the crew of the USS Pueblo and of the documents of evidence produced by the representatives of the Government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to the effect that the ship, which was seized by the self-defence (sic) measures of the naval vessels of the Korean People's Army in the territorial waters of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea on January 23, 1968, had illegally intruded into the territorial waters of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea on many occasions and conducted espionage activities of spying out important military and state secrets of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, shoulders full responsibility and solemnly apologizes for the grave acts of espionage committed by the U.S. ship against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea after having intruded into the territorial waters of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and gives firm assurance that no U.S. ships will intrude again in future into the territorial waters of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

"Meanwhile the Government of the United States of America earnestly requests the Government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to deal leniently with the former crew members of the USS Pueblo confiscated by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, taking into consideration the fact that these crew members have confessed honestly to their crimes and petitioned the Government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea for leniency.

"Simultaneously with the signing of this document, the undersigned acknowledges receipt of 82 former crew members of the Pueblo and one corpse.

"On behalf of the Government of the United States of America,

"Gilbert H. Woodward

"Major General, United States Army."

That seemed to have been that. But at the moment of release, Pak said America's preannouncement had violated the agreement terms.

"I am withdrawing my agreement," he said.

There was no violation, Woodward said. It was his understanding that if one country said something beforehand, the other could make any answering statement it wanted.

"It was a violation," said Pak, "and I'm going to release the men at 11:30 instead of 11 a.m."

It was, Woodward thought, Pak's last kick in the butt.

For two and a half hours the men of the Pueblo waited in their buses. The North Koreans played them a tape of one of Bucher's statements. An officer said North and South Korea should be reunited just as they were going to be reunited with their families. They were told how to cross over the line: no talking, no running, no looking back, no gestures. If any one violated the rules, they would be taken back to North Korea.

At the bridge of No Return, they took Bucher off the bus. He went to an ambulance where Hodge's body lay in a plain wooden box. The North Koreans removed the lid and the windings from the body and asked Bucher to identify it.

"That's Hodges," he said.

Photographers took pictures. Then they put the coffin back in the ambulance and drove it across the bridge. Hodges was the first one home.

Bucher was ordered to stand at attention at a podium surrounded by doves at the end of the bridge. Out strode Gen. Pak who harangued the American for 30 minutes while he shivered in the cold. Then an interpreter gave him a 30-second translation.

ACROSS THE BRIDGE

Finally, shortly before noon on Dec. 23, 11 months to the day and almost the hour after it had all begun, the men began to walk across, Bucher going first.

At 30 second intervals the men left the buses. North Koreans lined both sides of the walkway and some stood at the far end of the bridge. McLintock thought of giving a finger salute but didn't.

Schumacher thought only of the rules he was to follow. As he passed the last guard he broke into a run, ran up to an American MP and kissed him.

"At last," he said to himself.

A few days before, Ginther's watch had stopped at 12:05 and he decided not to rewind it because he thought that was when they would be released. He crossed the bridge of No Return at noon.

Murphy was the last to come over and then it was ended.

Whatever else he had done, Lloyd Bucher had brought his men back.